

The Qualities of the Dhamma & the Gradual Path of the Dhamma

(*Avijjā Sutta* (AN))

The Buddha's message has an order like the ocean which deepens gradually. For 45 years of his ministry, he maintained that gradual order in his teachings. Due to this special character, many listeners are interested in what the Buddha taught. Also, they practice this path happily. Furthermore, the Exalted One preached Dhamma with the clear understanding of listeners since he has especial psychic powers. The Buddha was able to read the minds of the disciples. When the Supreme Buddha explains his message first of all, he explains primary doctrines (*Ānupubbī desanā*) known as; the stories of generosity, virtue, blissful lives (like heaven), danger of craving, nature of the defilements, benefits of renunciation etc. When the listener's mind calms down, the Buddha explains the direct path to enlightenment (*Sāmuikkansika desanā*) which consists with the four noble truths.

As much as we listen to or read Buddha's message, our wisdom gradually increases. It means our ignorance about beings and the world ceases. With this understanding of the Buddha's teaching, if we practice it in our day-to-day life, we are going forward on the path of purification and getting rid of suffering and eventually reaching liberation. The ultimate result of all kinds of practicing in Buddhism is inner peace that nobody can disturb. If we are able to face any kind of positive or negative sensual experiences without fear, suffering, jealousy, attachment or anger, that is the real progress of our life. Our real success depends on how far external objects can't disturb our inner peace. It means our mind is very pure, calm and quiet. Then the mind is skillful in merits, and it understands the world reality as it is. This, spiritually, strong mind can face any kind of challenges in life without fear and sorrow. The more we purify our mind from negative thoughts, the more we are away from suffering. Our happiness completely depends on purifying our minds.

There are three kinds of main defilements (negative thoughts), those are greed, anger and ignorance. These are the roots of all negative thoughts. According to Buddhism, among these three defilements, **ignorance** (*Avijjā*) is the worse taint that causes suffering (unsatisfactoriness), and its results are worse, and it is so difficult to overcome (*Dandha virāgā mahāsāvajjā*). Desire (*Lobha*) is also difficult to overcome, but results are less dangerous than anger and delusion (*Dandha virāgā appasāvajjā*). The results of anger (*Dosa*) are more than desire, but easier to overcome than desire and delusion (*Mahāsāvajja Khippa virāgā*). By listening to the Buddha's message, reflecting on that message and concentrating on tranquility and insight meditation again and again, we can get rid of from above defilements gradually according to our effort, dedication and knowledge. If we can reduce defilement in our mind, it causes us to overcome suffering and live with real happiness. Buddhism always emphasizes the importance of understanding ignorance because ignorance is the main defilement. Also, as much as ignorance ceases, other defilements also gradually cease. For that, Buddhism explains specifically the nature of ignorance (or delusion) and how to overcome it.

The first step of ignorance is unknowing of Karmic Law. Some people think that we don't have any results from our actions. According to Buddhism, whether we like it or not, if we do something consciously, we will have the results accordingly. If we do something with a wicked mind, we will have bad results in this life or next lives because of our polluted mind. If we do something with a pure mind, we will have fruitful results because of our pure mind. If someone can understand this nature of karmic law, he or she can get rid of the first level of ignorance. This understanding results in cultivating good, but not evil. With this knowledge we can overcome a lot of difficulties, and practice wholesomeness in our lives.

The second step of ignorance is the unknowing of the arising of suffering. The experiences that we get through our senses arise and cease immediately. Because of ignorance we think that experience remains after we experienced it. That is why we suffer or get attached to our experience. When we think about something in our past experience, we go to the past situation, and we enjoy or worry with those thoughts because of our ignorance. We don't know that the experience has already ceased when we enjoy or worry about it. If we know that what we saw, heard, smelt, tasted, touched and thought ceased after the experience, we may remember it, but we don't worry because of right understanding and mindfulness. As soon as we remember that experience, we know that now 'I only read my own mind'. If we always are with this understanding, we can overcome defilements which create suffering.

Here the Supreme Buddha explains in an order how to overcome suffering. When we are going to practice this path, it is very easy to follow the path and get the results clearly if we know this order. From the beginning to the end, there are 10 steps that we have to fulfil on the path of liberation.

1. Associating noble friends who explain Buddha's message (*Sappurisa samseva*)

The supreme Buddha says the first need that we should have that associating a noble friend who explains the Buddha's message very clearly through impermanence. Although we have spiritual friends, sometimes we are not wise enough to identify their qualities. Therefore, to understand a noble friend we should have good qualities, be sensitive and wise.

2. Listening to Buddha's message, the Dhamma (*Saddhammasavaṇa*)

The main benefit of having a good friend is listening to the Buddha's message. According to Buddhism, having a good friend is one of the results of great merits that we have done in our previous lives. By listening to the Buddha's message, our knowledge and understanding about our mind and body gradually increase. As the result of understanding what the Buddha taught, our wisdom also increases. Wisdom (*Paññā*) can be divided into two; the knowledge of Karmic law and the knowledge of impermanence or the dependent origination. This knowledge guides us to get rid of suffering and achieve the final bliss of liberation.

With the knowledge of impermanence, we understand the world reality as it is. If we have any experience through our senses, five aggregates arise together. Five aggregates are forms (*Rupa*-රූප), feelings (*Vedanā*-වේදනා), perception (*Saññā*-සංකල්පනා), mental formations (*Samkhāra*-සංඛාර) and mind (*Viññāna*-විඤ්ඤාණ). These five aggregates arise together at the moment when the conditions are together, and they cease when the conditions separate instantly. These five things appear behind any kind of experiences in our life, but they are invisible, and have to be known with insight. The nature of these five aggregates is arising and ceasing. At the moment of ceasing everything ceases without leaving any remaining. The most valuable and interesting explanation in Buddhism is impermanence. It is said in Buddhism; **Not being occurred (in the past) comes to an occurrence. Being occurred (at the present) would not come to (the future) occurrence** (අනුන්වා සම්භවං නුන්වා න භවිස්සති). This is the nature of impermanence that Buddhism illustrates. Nowhere we can see such a teaching except in Buddhism.

According to the conventional truth, we meet a world before we are born and after we die. Nevertheless, according to the ultimate truth, the world arises when our senses arise, as soon as senses cease the world also ceases. All sciences, philosophies, religions describe their teachings depending on only conventional truth. Only Buddhism describes its teaching in ultimate truth. That is why the Buddhist way is the only way to end suffering completely. Buddhism is the real path to the solution for the continuation of suffering. Therefore, again and again we should listen to this message and should cleanse our knowledge about the dependent origination that describes the impermanence.

The *Dhamma*, what the Buddha taught, has six qualities. They are well expounded (*Svākkhāto*), directly visible (*Sandiṭṭhiko*), immediately effective (*Akālika*), calling one to come and see (*Ehipassiko*), leading onwards (*Opanayiko*), and to be personally realized by the wise (*paccattam vedītabbo viññuhi*).

The Buddha advised the first 60 disciples to preach Dhamma of which the beginning is excellent; the middle is excellent and the end is excellent. The beginning of the deliverance path is *Sīla* or virtue. And the middle is *Samadhi* or concentration. The end is Panna or wisdom. The Buddha points out to follow this order to his disciples. Here also the gradual path in Buddhism can be seen very clearly.

Understanding the Middle Path

On the path of liberation what the Buddha realized and proclaimed to the world, understanding the Middle path plays a big role. According to *Kacchānagotta Sutta*, if someone sees the arising of five aggregates, he doesn't go to the extreme of Nihilism / Annihilation (*Ucchedavāda*). Also, if someone sees the cessation of the five aggregates, he doesn't go to the extreme of Etenalism (*Sassatavāda*). These both extremes should be overcome with one only vision which is the dependent origination.

Here the Noble Eightfold Path is the fearless path to achieve our spiritual goal which is enlightenment. The Noble Eightfold Path is introduced as the and direct path for liberation. When we

practice this path actively and continuously, we are able to see the results within this life itself. Also, our inner peace increases day by day.

3. Confidence in Buddha's enlightenment (*Saddhā*)

If we have a chance to ask the Buddha's message from a noble friend, the confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha increases according to our knowledge. As a result of listening to this message we may know the suffering and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. Then the conviction arises in the Buddha's enlightenment. And our respect to the triple gem; the Buddha, his teachings and his noble disciples arises. With this understanding these three kinds of gems become major objects in our spiritual world. We always think about these triple gems. When we associate these three things, our mind fills with merits and pure thoughts. More and more we listen to the Buddha's message, we go on increasing our confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. *Saddhā* or confidence mentioned in Buddhism is like a seed for growing into a tree. When there is a seed, a tree grows, likewise when we have confidence (*saddhā*) in the triple gems, all kinds of spiritual qualities grow in our minds.

Saddhā is the seed (*saddhā beejaṃ*), the initiator, and thus the source at the beginning.

Saddhā is the hand that takes up all the advantageous of mental states.

Saddhā is the wealth (*saddhā dhanam*) above all, since it brings real and lasting happiness.

Saddhā is the jump (*saddhāya tarati ogham*), since it enables beings to cross the flood of pain.

Saddhā is the purifier, since it cleans pollutions of the mind.

4. Wise investigation (*Yonisa manasikārā*)

The way how we are able to stop arising defilements in our minds is wise investigation or wise reflection. There are many strategies that Buddhism recommends to reflect on to stop rising defilements. Among them the best way is that reflecting on impermanence of our mind and body according to the Buddha's instructions. Here we investigate our life as it is. Our mind and body always arise and cease with the conditions. When conditions are together, the experience arises. Also when the conditions separate the experience ceases nothing remaining.

5. Mindfulness and clear comprehension. (*Sati sampajañña*)

By now the one who listened to the Buddha's message has come along the path of getting rid of suffering. Little by little he practices Buddha's message in his life. He further practices awareness in mind and body. And he develops his mindfulness and attention seeing what happens to his mind and body.

6. Discipline in senses (*Indriya saṁvara*)

With this knowledge and understanding, the Buddha's disciple is ready to control his six senses through which he gets experience. When external objects contact senses such as eye, ear, nose etc, he keeps guards in his senses. Thus, his discipline in senses gradually increases. Discipline in senses plays a main role in the path of liberation.

7. Triple Discipline; behavioral, verbal and mental (*Thividha sucarita*)

Now he is going further on the path of purification. When he has the right understanding, he is ready to get rid of suffering. That is why he tries to develop his discipline in behavior, speech and mind. As much as he has knowledge, he controls his life and cultivates good. He does only good physically, verbally and mentally.

8. Fourfold Mindfulness (*Satipatthāna*)

In this step the disciple has gone forward more. Now he is ready to develop mindfulness fully in his mind and body. By this time, he practices mindfulness as four contemplations.

- i. Contemplation of body
- ii. Contemplation of feeling
- iii. Contemplation of mind
- iv. Contemplation of mental formations

Mindfulness, which is highly praised and recommended, is one of the main teachings in Buddhism. All the teachings explained by the Buddha for 45 years can be summarized in mindfulness. When mindfulness is practiced with correct vision, all other necessary qualities for liberation are gradually developed.

9. Seven enlightenment factors (*Satta bojjhaṅga*)

As the result of fourfold mindfulness, the seven factors of enlightenment increase to a higher level. These are major factors in spiritual life, like feet in our body. They are;

- i. Mindfulness (*Sati*)
- ii. Keen investigation (*Dhammavicaya*)
- iii. Effort or energy (*Viriya*)
- iv. Rapture or happiness (*Pīti*)
- v. Tranquility or calmness (*Passaddhi*)
- vi. Concentration (*Samādhi*)
- vii. Equanimity (*Upekkhā*)

10. Gaining the full knowledge and liberation from all kind of sufferings. (*Vijjāvimutti*)

This is the final result of practicing the Buddha's message. By now we have a good knowledge about our body and mind. And we are in the highest state in all kinds of qualities, discipline, wisdom and liberation.

At this level we have overcome ignorance and delusion entirely. We completely live in the present moment. Here we know that the world arises at the moment with the conditions. Nothing comes to the present from the past, and nothing goes to the future from the present. At the moment, the experience arises and ceases with the conditions. We don't have any attachment or anger with anything because of our complete understanding. We are fully enlightened. This is the path of liberation. This is the path of purification. This is the path of enlightenment. This is the path that the Supreme Buddha explained in his entire life to the world kindly.

These ten steps of the spiritual path are described in various ways and various steps in Buddhism according to situations and persons' differences. One time the Buddha has explained those ten steps into four steps.

They are;

1. Association with a spiritual friend who explains the Buddha's real message
2. Listening to and reading the Buddha's Message
3. Wise Reflection
4. Practice it as tranquility and insight meditation

However as wise people, we may try to go forward on the spiritual path day by day searching for real happiness. As a result of practicing the above four things, the five Spiritual Faculties increase in our life. They are named the five *indriya* or five Spiritual Faculties. They are faith (*saddhā*), effort (*virīya*), mindfulness (*sati*), concentration (*samādhi*), wisdom (*paññā*). Sometimes the Buddha has explained that, we have to practice only two doctrines, they are mindfulness and wisdom. When we practice those two things all other qualities gradually increase.

According to the *Avijjā Sutta*, even though there are 10 steps of liberation, the Buddha has explained the deliverance path in various ways for various people. Sometimes the Buddha explains the Noble Eightfold Path as the deliverance path. Further, the Blessed One explains the Seven Enlightenment Factors. Sometimes the Buddha points out to be expert in Six Senses as the deliverance path. Sometimes He describes the Five Spiritual Faculties for liberation. Also, the Worthy One preaches the Fourfold Mindfulness to some disciples for enlightenment. Sometimes He explains the Three Trainings; *Silā*, *Samādhi* and *Paññā*. Sometimes, the Buddha points out tranquility and insight meditation for liberation. Meanwhile, the Supremely Enlightened One instructs to practice only wisdom for Nibbana. *Paññā* = Wisdom is the greatest mental formation among other lofty / beautiful *Sobhana cetasika*. When wisdom develops within us, other positive mental formations gradually develop.

Sobhana cetasika Lofty Mental Formations (Beautiful Factors)

Sobhana-sādhāraṇa cetasika = Beautiful Universals (19)

1. *saddhā* = faith, confidence
2. *sati* = mindfulness, attentiveness
3. *hiri* = moral shame
4. *ottappa* = moral dread
5. *alobha* = non-attachment, greedlessness, generosity
6. *adosa* = hatelessness, goodwill
7. *tatramajjhataṭṭā* = equanimity, mental balance
8. *kāya-passaddhi* = tranquility of mental concomitants
9. *citta-passaddhi* = tranquility of consciousness
10. *kāya-lahutā* = agility or lightness of mental concomitants
11. *citta-lahutā* = agility or lightness of consciousness
12. *kāya-mudutā* = elasticity of mental concomitants
13. *citta-mudutā* = elasticity of consciousness
14. *kāya-kammaññatā* = adaptability of mental concomitants
15. *citta-kammaññatā* = adaptability of consciousness
16. *kāya-pāguññatā* = proficiency of mental concomitants
17. *citta-pāguññatā* = proficiency of consciousness
18. *kāyujjukatā* = uprightness of mental concomitants
19. *cittujjukatā* = uprightness of consciousness

Virati cetasika (Abstinences - 3)

1. *sammā-vācā* = right speech
2. *sammā-kammanta* = right action
3. *sammā-ājīvā* = right livelihood

Appamañña cetasika (Illimitables - 2)

1. *karuṇā* = compassion
2. *muditā* = sympathetic joy

Paññindriya (Wisdom - 1)

1. *paññindriya* = wisdom or insight



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